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CHAIRMAN'S MESSAGE

Welcome to this first home game of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) 2011 Asian Cup qualifying campaign for the Qantas Socceroos.

We are also pleased to welcome Kuwait to Australia.

There have been many landmark occasions for football in Australia in recent years, but none quite as significant for the long term benefit of the game than our membership of the AFC.

Just as Australia's future is closely linked with Asia so, too, is the future of Australian football, and this is our second opportunity to participate in the AFC Asian Cup.

From a football perspective, being part of the AFC gives our nine national teams high quality opposition every time they take the field, as well as the potential for an extended qualification campaign.

High quality opposition benefits the entire football family in Australia. It helps us to improve our own standards, quality of play, coaching and facilities; and, as the quality of our national teams improves, the impact will be felt down the line to the grassroots players which, turning full circle, gives us a larger pool of potential players for the national teams.

Being a member of the AFC also gives Australian fans a feast of football to enjoy and more opportunity than ever before to show support for the Qantas Socceroos, and to bring games to cities and regions which do not often see top level international football.

The last time the Qantas Socceroos played in the nation's capital was in 1996 against Tahiti, and the largest crowd that has ever watched a Qantas Socceroos game in Canberra was almost 30 years ago.

We understand that the people of Canberra have been eager to have an international match at Canberra Stadium and we look forward to seeing a large and passionate crowd.

Thank you to all our partners for their ongoing support.

My best wishes to both teams for what I am sure will be a competitive and enjoyable match for all.

FOOTBALL FEDERATION AUSTRALIA

FRANK LOWY AC
Chairman
Football Federation Australia

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GETTING TO KNOW...

MATT MCKAY

IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES

Favourite holiday destination?
Koh Samui; I'm about to go there with an end-of-season trip with the (Roar) boys.
Who's the joker in the Socceroos pack?
Probably Archie Thompson, he's a funny guy and he's always doing spur-of-the-moment stuff.
If you could be the lead singer of a band which one would it be?
I'd like to be 50 Cent, although he's not in a band...
Would you get yourself gangster?
Yeah, he does extremely well for himself.
He does do well for himself... What's your favourite TV show?
The Simpsons.
Which character would you say you most relate to in the show?
[*Long pause.*] On that show? [*Laughs.*]
No idea...
If you were going to make the missus dinner what would you do?
I'd make her a lamb rack with roast veggies and potatoes; coated in rosemary and paprika.
Sounds tasty. Who in world football would you most like to come up against?
Cesc Fabregas.
What actor would you want to play you in a movie of your life?
Who's that actor from *The Italian Job*?
Michael Caine or Mark Whalberg?
Yeah, Mark Whalberg, I think he's pretty cool.
What's the first thing you would do if you won the lotto?
I'd buy a Lambo.
Finish these sentences...
If I was to buy Pim a birthday present I would get him...
[*Laughs.*] Oh no... I've got some funny ones in mind, but I would get him a Queensland Roar jersey.
With McKay on the back?
I'd get it signed.
This time next year I will...
Be winning the A-League grand final.
Hopefully playing Gold Coast in the final?
Exactly.
My Socceroos teammates would say I am...
[*Laughs.*] Short.
Nice one, thanks for your time Matty.

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PAUL WADE

TAKING MY PICK

International football can produce some low-scoring affairs as teams play for points, but whatever Australia's all-A-League formation turns out to be tonight, it could prove different

THE SOCCEROOS LINE-UP for the recent 0-0 World Cup qualifier against Japan was described by a friend of mine as a 5-5-0 formation – five defenders, five midfielders and no strikers. When his sarcasm turned more serious we both agreed that, in the end, holding on for dear life in a football match is just part of the game.

In this day and age winning at this level (or should I say not losing) is paramount. We'd all like the game to be played as it should be – without foul play or faked injury and a 2-3-5 formation for good measure – but that, as you well know, ain't gonna happen.

Now as you sit there in readiness for the Socceroos Asian Cup qualifier, the starting XI still remains a mystery, so take a minute to find a pen and fill in the blanks as to who you think will cross the white line to start tonight.

Need some help? Here is my team: Theoklitos, Vargas, Moore, Cornthwaite, Mullen, McKay, Barbiero, Pondeljak, Zullo, Nichols, Thompson.

> **"NOT INCLUDING ARCHIE THOMPSON, CRAIG MOORE HAS PLAYED 20 MORE GAMES THAN THE REST OF THE SQUAD PUT TOGETHER. THIS COULD BE THE KEY TO TONIGHT'S GAME."**

To pick the goalkeepers position seemed to be the most challenging for me. They have raised the bar in recent years and all three keepers are well worth a shot between the sticks. It came down to Theoklitos and Galekovic, but I settled on the Melbourne Victory 'keeper. After a clean sheet in the grand final his confidence should be sky high and at this level you need lots of that, let's hope he grabs his chance for a debut.

One man who grabbed the chance and hasn't let go is Craig Moore. After 42 internationals and three goals to his name he is by far the most experienced out there tonight. If you don't count Archie Thompson's 31 internationals, Moore has played 20 more games than the rest of the squad put together. This could be the key to tonight's game. In defence it'll be a problem-solving exercise that will need all his experience. With just one cap between Vargas and Cornthwaite I'm relying on their game sense, speed and strength.

Out wide on one side of midfield I've got Daniel Mullen. His discipline alone disarmed Queensland in the semi-final recently. On the other side there's Michael Zullo. He could very well be the new Stan Lazaridis. His willingness to take on and beat players will provide one headache after another for Kuwait.

I'm very much in favour of the blend of industry and invention in the middle of the park, so Matt McKay and Tom Pondeljak get the nod for the industry and Fabian Barbiero gets the gig as the inventor. McKay's odometer reading has to be one of the highest in the league. If he can do the simple things right it should allow Barbiero time and space to play the killer balls. Pondeljak's stats speak wonders including seven grand final appearances dating back to the NSL days and arriving in the front third when all seems lost is what he excels at.

Picking a strike partnership was a challenge. With Allsopp missing the options were giving Matt Simon or Mitch Nichols with one international between them a go or give Archie Thompson a reprieve. Verbeek's comments in the media about Archie being "hopeless" against Indonesia recently can't be a good sign, but I'll give Archie the start.

I also agree that Nichols could play a big part in the Socceroos future. It was noted that he is always there or thereabouts when the ball goes into the penalty box, though he did miss some chances against Adelaide.

There are no excuses for not selecting your team. Not finding a pen is not an excuse. Guys, I'll bet any lady close has one in her bag. Watch she doesn't slap you and enjoy the game.

PICK YOUR STARTING 11

1
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THE BEAUTIFUL GAME

With the official launch of the new Indigenous Football Development Program last weekend, Football Federation Australia are investing in the future of the sport and people of Australia

ANY good football club knows when you're strong, you have to work to become even stronger. Look at Manchester United or Barcelona when they sign a couple of players and ship out those past their best; success isn't the finish line – it's the foundation for the future.

Now Football Federation Australia has taken this philosophy into the domestic game's growth, with the announcement of the Indigenous Football Development Program.

Launched at last weekend's Hyundai A-League Grand Final by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and FFA chairman Frank Lowy, the program aims to take football to Australia's Indigenous communities and help create pathways into the game and for life beyond sport.

"There has been some remarkable Indigenous football players such as Harry Williams and Bridgette Star who have represented their country and their community with distinction, but we would like to see more," Mr Lowy said. "We believe we have a responsibility to encourage more young people of Indigenous background to play football as a way to improve their life through better health, better education and improved skills."

The ambitious 10-year plan aims to have at least five per cent of players in all national teams and major competitions of Indigenous background, and will begin with an annual Indigenous Football Festival to be held in July at Townsville, home of new A-League team, North Queensland Fury.

"The Indigenous Football Festival is an important component of our plan from a long term structural and development perspective," FFA CEO Ben Buckley said.

"The Indigenous Football Festival provides that purpose, and gives young people from communities something to aspire to participate in each year."

In 2009, the festival will comprise 16 teams drawn from communities all over Australia. The 16 communities will be identified by FFA and Member Federations, in conjunction with newly appointed Indigenous ambassadors Warren Mundine, AO, and John Moriarty, AM, and supported by a number of initial coach mentors led by Adelaide United captain Travis Dodd.

The coach mentors will provide the initial coaching clinics for the 16 communities participating in the Indigenous Football Festival, as well as ongoing mentoring for teachers or individuals managing the teams.

FFA will work closely with member federations in each state and territory and appoint Indigenous Football Development Officers in key locations, and by 2010 the program aims to offer two young people a football scholarship to a senior secondary school or into higher education.

Self-confessed football tragic Mundine said football offered many opportunities for young people of Indigenous background, and pointed to the historical and current role models in the game.

"It's another tool for opening up Indigenous kids' universe. Football's played everywhere in the world. My son played football and when he got to about 13, his mates said, 'You're better off going to rugby league.' I said to him, 'That's fine – but remember, you could be in an African village, not speak the language, and pull out a football and people will speak your language.'

"I'm a great believer of history. I grew up in the '60s and '70s with the great old football clubs, and you see leaders of the Aboriginal movement, like Gordon Briscoe, Charles Perkins, John Moriarty – they were good football players. Gordon and Charlie went to England in the '50s and played. John was actually the first Indigenous player selected for the Australian team, prior to the Socceroo days.

"Then there's Jade (North) and Travis (Dodd) – two great leaders. For people involved in the game, Indigenous people have great things to offer."

And what code did Mundine's son choose in the end?

"He stayed with football!"

> "THE INDIGENOUS FOOTBALL FESTIVAL GIVES YOUNG PEOPLE FROM COMMUNITIES SOMETHING TO ASPIRE TO PARTICIPATE IN EACH YEAR."
>
> – FFA CEO BEN BUCKLEY

IMAGE: JULIE KIRKCOLDIS

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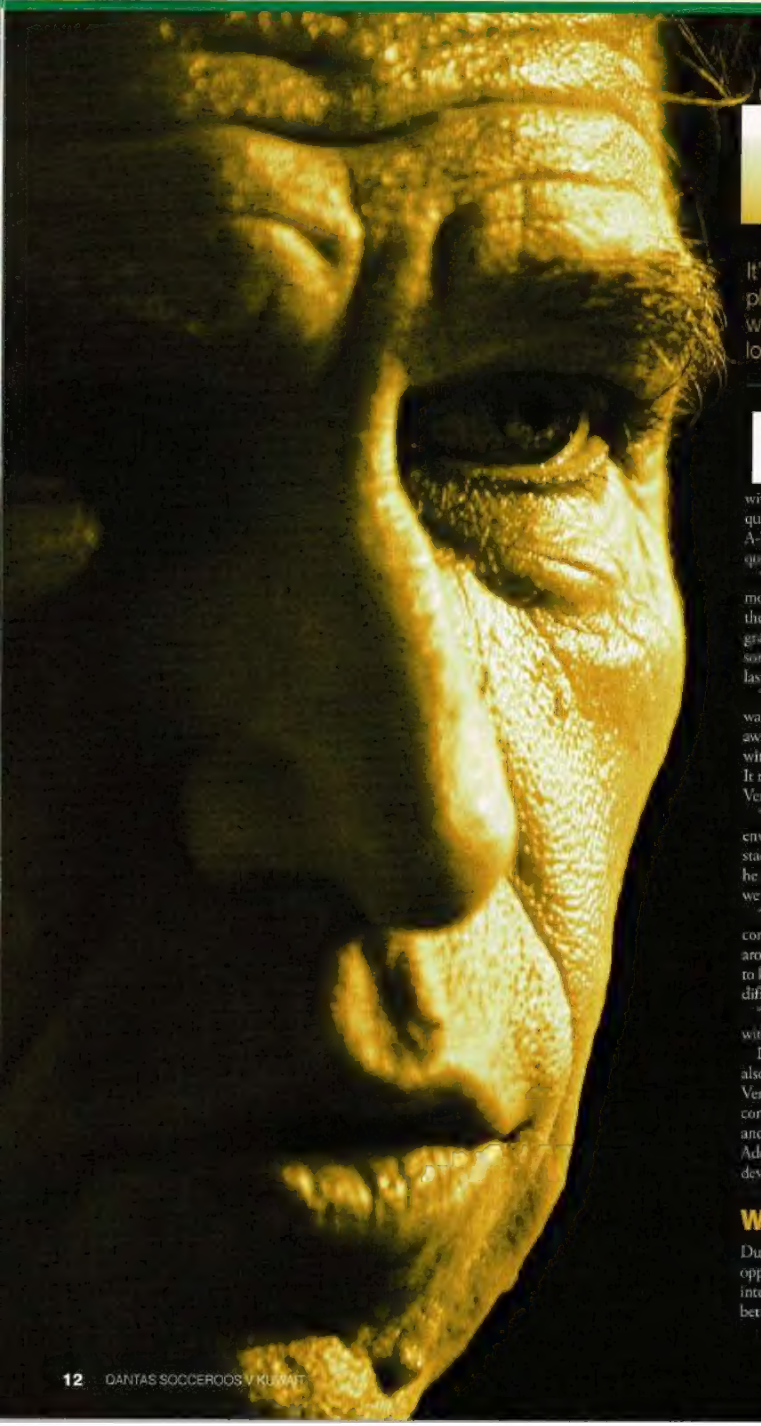

LEADER OF THE PACK

It's as much about providing a platform for players as it is about winning, as coach **PIM VERBEEK** looks for a winning formula

IT'S a two-pronged assault for national coach Pim Verbeek at the moment, with qualification for both next year's World Cup and the 2011 Asian Cup on his mind. This week's match with Kuwait is the team's second Asian Cup qualifier and the coach is sticking with his Hyundai A-League-based squad again. The coach has no qualms about the players at his disposal.

"These are the best players in the A-League at the moment," he says of his assembled squad. "Most of them were involved in the semi-finals and in the grand final so that was good, but we also picked up some young players that showed themselves in the last few weeks of the season."

The reason for the coach's faith in his players was the performance they produced in the 0-0 draw away to Indonesia. In trying circumstances, and with little preparation, the team battled to a draw. It remains a learning curve for the squad, but Verbeek is pleased with what he's seeing.

"(I learnt) they can do a job in a hostile environment – there were 60,000 people in the stadium – and without any preparation time," he reflects. "We were organised and we did what we had to do.

"International football is different than domestic competitions, because you have different players around you and less time to prepare, so they have to know what job they have to do," he says. "It's a different atmosphere and the style of play is different.

"I'm looking forward to seeing how the players deal with the different environments and situations."

Different environments for the domestic players also includes the Asian Champions League and Verbeek will be keeping a close eye on the up-coming fixtures involving Central Coast Mariners and Newcastle Jets after witnessing the success of Adelaide United and the effect it had on the development of their players.

WORLD STAGE

During this week Verbeek will have an ideal opportunity to see how the players shape up for international football, with more lead-in time and better preparation than for the Indonesia game.

"They all look very focused on winning a Socceroos cap," Verbeek says. "The Asian Cup is a big tournament and they know they will have the chance to show themselves in the next couple of years. Hopefully a lot of them will step up for the World Cup and that's what it's all about; that's why we spend a lot of time, energy and money to get the boys the best preparation, and then it's up to them to give us what we need to win the game."

The onus will certainly be on the team to attack, with home advantage, and Verbeek will be demanding on his players this time around. "There are no excuses," he says.

Verbeek also remains confident that despite opening their qualification with a goalless draw, the team will play much the same way, perhaps with more intensity because of the home advantage. "We always try to win the game," he says bluntly, "but you always have to deal with the opposition too, because you never know what the opponents will allow you to do.

"We know Kuwait can be strong and they have individual players, like all Middle Eastern teams, so there's a bit of a surprise for us.

"But we're playing at home and with home advantage the players will want to show themselves. The field looks very good so if we can play our normal game – more possession, control, and attack – then we can have a result."

> **"IT'S GIVEN AN EXTRA DIMENSION TO EVERY FOOTBALL PLAYER TO PLAY FOR THEIR NATIONAL TEAM. THEY ENJOY EVERY MOMENT."**

TIME TO PERFORM

The step up for players from domestic to international level is a challenge facing the entire squad; Verbeek may have been critical of some, but it's about keeping his comments in perspective. "International football is different, you don't have as many chances to show yourself," he says. "Players have to understand that it's nice if you do well in the A-League – and that's why we select them – but then they have to also show us that they can do it in international football as well."

Verbeek feels his comments have acted to spur his domestic-based charges on to the possibilities of what lie ahead. "They are all proud to play an international game for the Socceroos and they give everything," Verbeek says. "In that game (against Indonesia) they gave 100 per cent – they want to go to the Asian Cup and to show themselves for World Cup selection also – that's perfect.

"You can see they're coming into camp focused on what they have to do to be a better player. I am sure they are all enjoying being in camp and talking to the boys about their clubs.

"It's given an extra dimension to every football player to play for their national team. They enjoy every moment."

After this Asian Cup qualifier Verbeek will turn his attention back to the World Cup, with three matches coming up: one in April and two in June. Whether any A-League-based players will be included is something the coach can't be sure of due to the domestic season now concluded. "I'm curious what the players are going to do from now until April 1," he says. "This is a big game so it's very difficult for me, and the players, to say at this moment."

Either way, Verbeek is pleased to give players a chance to prove their worth on the international team, and with the coach looking at two competitions he hopes his pool of players for both will widen.

"We always said it was about giving the players in the A-League the possibility to show themselves on the international level," he says. "They all know it's different and this is an opportunity for them and for us."

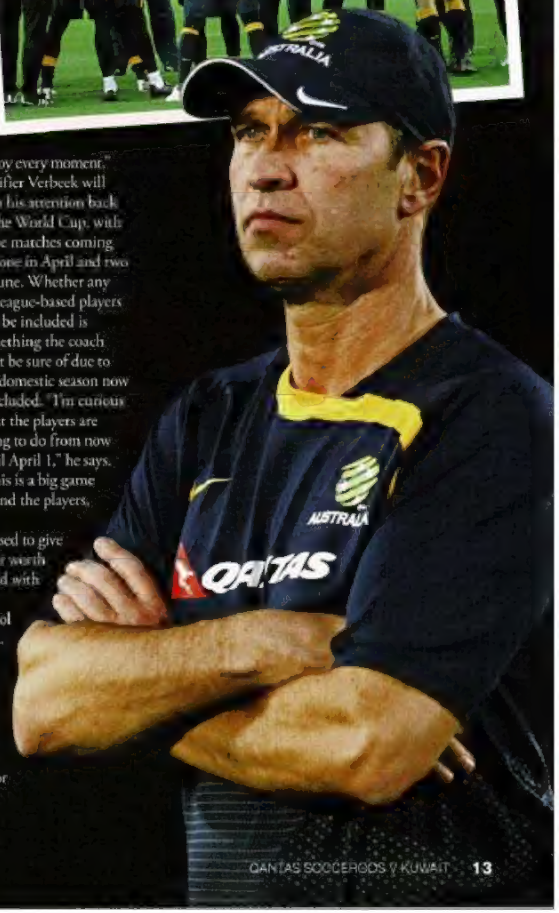

IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES

TOP OF HIS GAME

For Newcastle Jets defender **NIKOLAI TOPOR-STANLEY**, the Kuwait game represents a chance to return home as a member of the Qantas Socceroos

WHEN Football Federation Australia announced the Asian Cup qualifier against Kuwait would be played in the nation's capital at Canberra Stadium, there was one Hyundai A-League player in particular who was hoping to be part of the squad: Canberra-born Nikolai Topor-Stanley.

His selection in the squad, though, isn't something the defender is letting himself be carried away by and he remains level-headed about the excitement of returning to his place of birth as a member of an A-League select-team representing his country.

"It's good to be in the mix and have the opportunity to show Pim that A-League players can step up to international level," he says.

Along with the desire to impress Verbeek and his coaches, there's added pressure to show that he, and the rest of the squad, have what it takes to compete at the international level, especially with the team looking to qualify for two tournaments at the moment: next year's World Cup and the 2011 Asian Cup.

"We owe it ourselves to show that we are good enough and that we deserve to be there," Topor-Stanley says. "You've just got to look at what Adelaide have done in Asia and you see that Australian players are good enough to compete.

"As players we are confident we can do a job."

For Topor-Stanley, proving his ability to convert from domestic to international football is a particularly tough one, given the competition he faces in his position. It's a favourable conundrum for Verbeek, but not for the Jets defender.

"It's pretty difficult for me," he says of earning a starting spot this week, "Craig Moore is Craig Moore and Roddy Vargas has just won an A-League title and he's been rock solid all season, so it's going to be very difficult for me to get a starting position.

"I've got four days to prove to Pim that I deserve to be in the team."

Perhaps freshness will be on Topor-Stanley's side. It's been a few weeks now since the end of the A-League season and maybe that rest will give him an edge in the selection stakes. The defender, again, refuses to become carried away with the hypothetical scenarios. "I wouldn't say that," he says. "What I do have over Roddy, though, is that I'm a natural left-footer – but he's been rock solid and you can't fault Pim for picking him."

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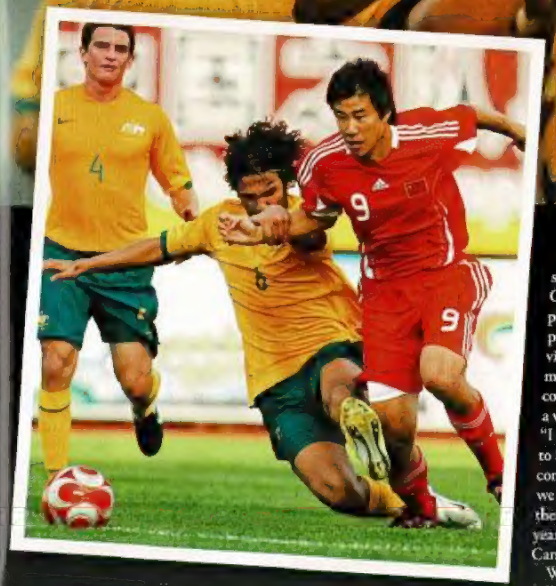

HOME COMING

Should the defender get a start, or game time, on Thursday, it will probably mean more than the other caps he's won so far, because the game is being played in Canberra. It's a place that, aside from being his place of birth, holds good memories for the player.

He made his debut for Sydney FC in Canberra, in a Pre-Season Cup game, where he also scored a goal. Plus, he'll be cheered by a large contingent of friends and family, so if added incentive was needed to work hard in camp, Topor-Stanley certainly has it. "It's very exciting," he says simply about playing in front of friends and family in Canberra.

It's been a barren spell away from Canberra for the player, with two years passing since he last visited. He's hoping to make it a happy home coming with a start, and a win, for the Socceroos. "I normally come back to Sydney and Mum comes up to visit, because we have a lot of family there, but it's been two years since I was in Canberra," he explains.

Whether the defender will have time to visit his family during the visit he's not so sure, but he's pleased to be returning home as part of the national team set-up.

"Just to be a part of the Socceroos, especially in Canberra where I'm sure I'll have a lot of support from family and friends."

It's a remarkable achievement on Topor-Stanley's part to be a member of the Socceroos, given the disappointing season his team from last season, Perth Glory, experienced; it also demonstrates the exceptional form he's had at club level to be selected by Verbeek.

"We didn't have the best seasons, but I enjoyed a lot of success since I was moved into the centre of defence," he explains.

Since the end of the regular A-League season, however, it's been a busy time for Topor-Stanley that's included a move to wooden-spooners Newcastle Jets and the team's preparation for their up-coming maiden voyage into Asia.

"That was the draw card for me to move to Newcastle," he says. As well as a new start, there are fresh challenges on the horizon with the Asian Champions League that gives the defender more opportunities to prove to Verbeek that he's capable of stepping up. "I really wanted to play in the ACL and emulate the success Adelaide had this year... and then go from there."

For Topor-Stanley, there are also individuals in the game to look up to, and the defender says Pim Verbeek has been an influential figure in his continuing development. "He's told me to observe Craig Moore, because he's played at the very top of the game, and to observe how he conducts himself. I've taken that on board and I've enjoyed it," he says of his experience in previous Socceroos camps.

And while Moore is certainly an ideal role model on the pitch, Topor-Stanley says Pim is proving to be the same off it. "He doesn't leave anyone out in the cold and you know where you stand with him," he says.

For Topor-Stanley, with an exciting return to his home town on the cards, he'll be hoping that come the end of the game Pim won't leave him out in the cold and gives him an opportunity to show the coach, as well as local family and friends, just what he's capable of doing.

VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

As the oldest player in the Qantas Socceroos squad, captain **CRAIG MOORE** knows full well just how much the players want a win on home soil against Kuwait

IMAGES: GETTY IMAGES

NATIONAL coach Pim Verbeek has come under some criticism in the press of late over his frank assessment of the Hyundai A-League. But should any domestic players need evidence of his willingness not to let location get in the way of quality, they should look to their Socceroos captain.

After a brilliant season leading Queensland Roar to the brink of the A-League grand final, Moore is proof that if Verbeek perceives players to possess the attributes and standards he requires, he will pick them in his team.

Many in the press were critical of the last Asian Cup qualifying game against Indonesia at Jakarta and while it certainly wasn't a pretty game, there is an argument that it was a good result.

In this type of campaign, where points are like gold dust, the first aim of any away fixture is not to lose and if you can keep a clean sheet, all the better. In that light, the opening qualifier doesn't seem half as bad. There is no doubt the team, many of whom had not faced such conditions before, did the job asked of them.

Moore acknowledges some of the younger players would have benefited from the experience, but says the attitude will be much different for the game at Canberra tonight.

"How do you become experienced? You have to be given an opportunity and play games at that level," he says. "Again we've got a squad based on the domestic league but I'm sure with a few more sessions under our belt the performance will be a lot better, and it'll need to be because it's at home, and away from home is a totally different ball game."

In many ways football's return to Canberra could not have been better timed. The team know they have to get a result to put them in a good position in the early stages of the campaign, while the individual players know that a good performance here would keep them at the front of Verbeek's mind for future internationals.

That desire to succeed is already obvious in training, according to the captain.

"It's good to see," he says. "The boys want to come in and do well and they've all got a fantastic attitude and that's a big part. I think they'd like to extend their time in training and get involved as much as possible and that's a great attitude as well."

As the most experienced player in the squad, Moore is fulfilling the same role he does at club level and he knows just how much energy the younger players bring to the training field – even if he may not have it himself.

"They are getting younger and younger and I'm just getting older," Moore laughs. "I remember the times when the youngest was in the middle during training and I'm certainly nowhere near that now. It's all good fun. You do buzz off the younger lads and the energy they've got."

PERSONAL AIMS

It fair to say that Moore's worth to Australia has become even more pronounced over recent fixtures. The skipper's ability to read the game and remain unfazed by the occasion means he has become a key part of Verbeek's regular playing roster since coming out of retirement for the World Cup qualifier against Qatar last year.

The 33-year-old has proven that he still has what it takes to perform at the very highest level – as shown by his performance against Japan in the World Cup qualifier earlier this year, which was backed up in Roar's 2-0 A-League semi-final win over Central Coast Mariners just hours after flying back into Australia.

Given Verbeek's use of his captain, it's fair to say the coach views Moore as key to his plans for the Asian and World Cup campaigns.

> **THIS IS A HOME GAME AND IT'S IMPORTANT THAT WE PICK UP ALL THREE POINTS. WE'VE GOT A LITTLE BIT MORE TIME TOGETHER, SO THERE'LL BE NO EXCUSES.**

For Moore, who battled testicular cancer earlier in the season, the thought of playing in another World Cup remains a massive target, but one he refuses to place too much upon.

"I would love to go through to the World Cup – if we qualify. But it's one of those ones where it's an aim, and it has to be an aim for me to continue. But you have to take it a game at a time, because it's a year away.

"If you're in form, and playing well and fit, and it all falls into place, I don't see any reason why that wouldn't be but that's a long way away," he says.

For now, the focus remains on getting ready for tonight's game. After a tough A-League season, both on and off the field, the Socceroos game against Kuwait is a good book-end to the playing year.

"I'm looking forward to it," Moore says. "After the first game in Indonesia where we picked up a point, this is a home game, on Australian soil, and it's important that we pick up all three points. We've got a little bit more time together as well, so there'll be no excuses about that this time round. I think everybody will be looking forward to the challenge."

TEAM PERFORMANCE

Moore is adamant that, although the 0-0 against Indonesia provided a vital point, the Socceroos must go for the victory in Canberra. International football rarely provides the kind of free-flowing entertainment fans love to see. There is usually far too much at stake and the levels of ability, technique and coaching prevent any gaps between teams becoming too apparent.

Verbeek has sometimes faced disapproval for supposedly defensive tactics, but the fact is, in both qualifying campaigns he has done exactly what is required. What matters, and what people remember, is qualifying for the tournament.

Moore knows this and believes the team will be set up to go for the win against Kuwait. Caution won't be thrown to the wind, but fans can certainly expect to see a few more goals this time around.

"I have no doubt," Moore says. "We didn't want to be disrespectful [to Indonesia], but the pitch was horrific. We didn't play our best but we still came away without losing a goal and picked up a good point away from home. But it will have to be a better performance here in Canberra against Kuwait and it'll be a winning performance, as well."

And when the captain shows that kind of positive attitude, it can only bode well for the first Socceroos game in the nation's capital in more than 10 years.

"I don't think we'll be set out to be defensively minded for a home game," he says. "Even for the [two] World Cup qualifiers against Qatar, the games have been about attacking and getting at them, and in those games we scored three in the first half, so our intention will be to score goals and win the game."

GETTING TO KNOW...

DANNY VUKOVIC

Looking forward to the Kuwait game?
Yeah, it's always good to be back in the camp and with the Asian Champions League coming up with my club, it's good for the confidence to get a call-up.
How different is it training with the Socceroos?
It's a lot more professional environment, you're looked after a lot more and you're training with the best coaches in Australia.
What's your favourite holiday destination?
Probably somewhere like Italy. I went over when I was 16 with a soccer team.
If you could be the lead singer of a band which one would it be?
Probably Red Hot Chilli Peppers, they're one of my favourite bands.
You'd need a lot of tattoos to be in the Chilli Peppers.
[Laughs] Nah mate, one's enough for me.
Which three people – dead or alive – would you invite to a dinner party?
Hugh Hefner, for obvious reasons, Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan.
What's your favourite TV show?
Entourage.
If you were going to make dinner for the missus, what would you do?
My speciality is chicken schnitzel.
That's a bit better than Matt Simon's burritos...
Yeah, he's not very creative.
Who in world football would you most like to come up against?
Cristiano Ronaldo.
Would you get close to him?
Probably not – but it would be fun to pick the ball out of the net.
What actor would you want to play you in a movie of your life?
Heath Ledger, if he was still alive.
What's the first thing you'd do if you won the lotto?
I'd buy the Central Coast Mariners, and I'd bring in some massive-named player.
Finish these sentences...
If I was to buy Pim a birthday present I would get him...
[Laughs] Oh, I thought these were going to be easy questions. I can't answer that.
This time next year I will...
Hopefully be playing overseas.
My Socceroos teammates would say I am...
A big-head.

IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES

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Fabian BARBIERO	Shehab A. KANKONE
Shannon COLE	Yaqoub N. A. Y. T ABDULLAH
Robert CORNTHWAITE	Mohammad A. JARRAGH
Tarek ELRICH	Hussain F. ALI
Eugene GALEKOVIC	Mohammad R. SANAD
Dean HEFFERNAN	Fahad M. AL-RASHIDI
Ben KANTAROVSKI	Saleh SH. ALHENDI
Matthew McKAY	Ahmad S. A. S. ALAZEMI
Craig MOORE	Khaled KH. MATAR
Daniel MULLEN	Fahad ALEBRAHIM
Mitch NICHOLS	Adel H. ALSHAMMARI
Tom PONDELJAK	Mesaed N. ALENZI
Paul REID	Talal N. ALENZI
Matt SIMON	Waled A. H. R. JUMAH
Michael THEOKLITOS	Hamad N. ALENEZI
Archie THOMPSON	Bader A. B. A. A. ALMUTWA
Matthew THOMPSON	Jarah M. H. M. H. ALATEEQI
Nikolai TOPOR-STANLEY	Jarah A. ALTHAFIRI
Rodrigo VARGAS	Hussain A. KANKONE
Danny VUKOVIC	Nawaf KH. S. M. ALKHALDI
Michael ZULLO	Abdullah S. ALMARZOUQ
	Faisal M. DASHTI
	Ali A. ALMAQSEED
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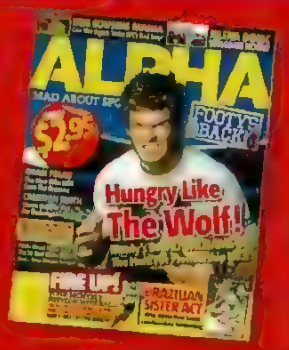

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AUSTRALIA V KUWAIT, CANBERRA STADIUM, 8PM, 05.03.09

GUNNING FOR POINTS

Good news for Canberra football fans: after the troublesome stalemate against Indonesia in Jakarta, the Qantas Socceroos will be playing to win in their first home game of the 2011 Asian Cup campaign

■ WORDS Tom Smithies

YOU COULD ALMOST forgive Pim Verbeek for having a split personality. On the one hand the Socceroos coach is riding the crest of a wave to the World Cup, co-ordinating the coagulation of his star names from all corners of the globe for whistlestop raids on the likes of Japan and Qatar.

On the other Verbeek – whose contract runs until 2010 – must navigate a way through an Asian Cup qualifying route with a Hyundai A-League ensemble, trying to secure passage to a tournament for which he may not even be around, and tonight is the latest instalment on that road.

But it's part of what he signed up for, and this week the Dutchman has had his sleeves rolled up in Canberra for an intensive three-day camp to impose his tactical blueprint on the domestic competition's finest.

VERBEEK LIKES TO USE PLAYERS THAT HAVE A PRE-EXISTING CONNECTION TO OVERCOME THE LACK OF PREPARATION TIME.

Part of which has simply been testing the fitness of those who haven't played competitively since the end of the regular A-League season.

THE GOALKEEPERS

Verbeek faces a tough decision, possibly the most challenging of all for the coach. Eugene Galekovic is the man in possession after making his Socceroos debut in January against Indonesia – the A-League's Goalkeeper of the Year has made the most of his decision to leave Melbourne Victory in 2007 in search of regular football.

Yet by common consent he was slow to react for Tom Pondeljak's winner in the grand final last weekend, albeit from an unsighted position, and Michael Theoklitos – his opposite number at Telstra Dome – was in magnificent form. Plus, the Victory No.1 will also be on a high after his side's championship victory.

For Danny Vukovic, his absence for a chunk of the season through suspension, plus Central Coast Mariners' early exit from the finals, seems to have pushed him back in the queue to third choice.

THE DEFENCE

Verbeek will have to re-fashion the back four he employed in Indonesia after the withdrawal from the squad of Adelaide United's Scott Jamieson. The young left-footer's drive and crossing will be missed by Verbeek, who likes his fullbacks to get forward.

In his place, Dean Heffernan (who pushed into a left-wing position in Jakarta) is tailor-made to drop back into defence.

The coach will also have to rule on whether Matt Thompson's fitness is deemed to be an issue. But the Newcastle Jets captain is seen as freakishly fit, and the chance to add to his caps has been a huge incentive to maintain those levels since the end of Newcastle's catastrophic season.

IMAGES: GETTY IMAGES

Rodrigo Vargas, who took a blow to the side of the head in the grand final, will be likely to feature. It doesn't seem as though the defender, who at one stage last year seemed destined to be forever a bridesmaid and was named in five straight Socceroos squads last year without getting a sniff, will be left out of this team.

Alongside him, Craig Moore will be captain, an inspiration and Verbeek's evergreen lieutenant on the park.

THE MIDFIELD

With Heffernan the prime candidate to slot in at leftback, Michael Zullo will hope for the chance to start on the left side of Verbeek's midfield. Out of action only since Queensland Roar lost the A-league preliminary final to Adelaide, Zullo's fitness shouldn't be an issue and his penetration will be a major plus in a game Australia have to win.

On the opposite flank Tom Pondeljak's moment of inspiration to win the grand final should have him demanding the ball from the off tonight, adding to the Indian Summer Pondeljak has enjoyed since switching from the Central Coast to Melbourne last year.

EXPECT A MORE ATTACKING OUTLOOK, WITH THE FULLBACKS AND WIDE PLAYERS GIVEN ENCOURAGEMENT TO CROSS EARLY FOR THE FRONT TWO TO FEED OFF.

As for the centre of the park, Verbeek has given himself a wide quite a quotient to choose from, with Fabian Barbiero, Ben Kantarovski and Mitch Nichols all pushing Matt McKay and Paul Reid for a starting berth in the side.

In truth, Kantarovski and Nichols are really in the squad for the experience, but with Celeski's withdrawal from the squad there is a possibility of maybe one – more likely Nichols – to feature at some stage.

THE ATTACK

The omission of Dylan Macallister and Danny Allsopp from this squad means Verbeek has been reduced to just two out-and-out forwards. It means the deployment of Archie Thompson and Matt Simon from the start if he is to go for a 4-4-2 formation, despite Verbeek's candid description of Thompson (along with his strike partner Allsopp) as "hopeless" against Indonesia.

It doesn't leave much in the way of a Plan B, especially as Thompson is coming off playing the full 90 minutes in the A-League Grand Final on Saturday night.

Verbeek likes to use players who have a pre-existing connection to overcome the lack of preparation time, but he will be forced here to start with Thompson and Simon and hope his midfield can give them the service that was missing in the match against in January in Jakarta.

THE TACTICS

Take points on the road and win your home games was the mantra Verbeek intoned yet again as his team headed into camp, and he knows the Asian Cup campaign needs a win to ensure there are no nerves over a group that isn't the toughest around by any stretch.

With more days to prepare his team, no change of climate or time zone and no travel, the coach is well aware that everything is set in his favour.

So expect a more attacking outlook, with the fullbacks and wide players given encouragement to cross early for the front two to feed off. There isn't really a local equivalent of Tim Cahill, with his ghostly ability to appear unmarked in the box, so set pieces will be a potent tactic allowing Craig Moore and Vargas the chance to get forward and involved in the play.

Verbeek won't have to look far for a briefing on how underestimating Kuwait can be dangerous. While Australia defeated them on home soil 2-0 in the qualifiers for the 2007 Asian Cup, Graham Arnold was forced to take an understrength Socceroos team to Kuwait City for the return leg and lost 2-0, albeit in vastly different temperatures to this match, but proof of what the Kuwaitis are capable of doing.

KUWAIT ASSESSMENT

The Qantas Socceroos haven't played Kuwait since qualifying stages in 2006 for the last Asian Cup, but the visitors will be arriving in Canberra with a clear objective of leaving with points

WORDS Peter Smith

KEY PLAYERS

Ahmad Ajab Al-Azemi

Despite a moderate goal-scoring record in recent times, Kuwait have genuine danger men in attack with deadly striker Ahmad Ajab Al-Azemi forming a lethal partnership with his more creative colleague Bader Al-Mutwa.

Al-Azemi is one of Asia's great unsung strikers, scoring at a rate of a goal a game for the national team, and the 24-year-old was recently picked up on loan by top Saudi Arabian club Al-Shabab for their forthcoming AFC Asian Champions League campaign.

Although Kuwait were bundled out of FIFA World Cup qualifying in stage three last year, Al-Azemi remains third on the list of goal scorers across Asia for South Africa 2010. Al-Azemi scored an impressive six of Kuwait's eight goals in the campaign, including a hat-trick against Syria.

On the domestic front, Al-Azemi plays for the Al Qadisiya club and was crowned the nation's top scorer in 2007, precipitating his rise to the national team.

His goals in last season's AFC Champions League helped the club reach the quarter-finals only to fall 4-3 on aggregate to Japanese super-club Urawa Red Diamonds.

The imposing performances attracted the attention of Al-Shabab who will be looking for the No. 9 to repeat the goal scoring feats in this year's edition of the Asian club showpiece.

Bader Al-Mutwa

Despite an impressive goal scoring record, Bader Al-Mutwa generally features in a secondary striking role behind Al-Azemi. Just 24 years old, Al-Mutwa has already featured more than 50 times for the national team.

Al-Mutwa debuted for his country as an 18-year-old, and immediately formed a partnership with Kuwait captain and legendary striker Bashar Abdullah. Playing alongside one of the most-capped players in world football evidently proved beneficial for the youngster's development, and Al-Mutwa was named the second-best player in Asia in 2006 behind Qatar's teen prodigy Khalfan Ibrahim.

Considered the team's creative genius, Al-Mutwa also has developed a considerable rapport with Al-Azemi at international level and more recently at club level. Al-Mutwa has spent his entire career at Al Qadisiya helping his team to numerous domestic conquests, as well as being the driving force behind the club's remarkable run to the 2006 AFC Asian Champions League semi-finals.

Socceroos defenders will also remember Al-Mutwa's showing in 2006 when Kuwait triumphed at home in Asian Cup qualifiers as the darling of the local fans helped secure victory by edging past several defenders before shooting from the edge of the area to make the score 2-0.

Al-Mutwa will be especially keen to repeat that feat after missing a penalty in the team's 1-0 loss to Oman last month, in a result that could prove pivotal come the end of the qualifying campaign.

THE COACH

Goran Tufegdzic was appointed as national team head coach in early February after taking the reigns from previous incumbent Mohamed Ibrahim, who quit after Kuwait's 2-0 defeat against Oman in their opening AFC Asian Cup qualifier.

The Serbian, who has coached premier local club Al-Shabab, faced the immediate challenge of reinforcing the national team's confidence after their loss to Oman.

The Kuwaitis have played just one full international under Tufegdzic drawing 1-1 at home to Azerbaijan.

The 37-year-old mentor, in his first national team role, will at least have had some time to make his imprint on the players during their nine days in camp at New Zealand prior to arriving in Canberra.

The Kuwait players will be familiar with a turn-over in coaches, with Tufegdzic being the 10th change in just seven years since German World Cup-winner Berti Vogts relinquished control in 2002.

CURRENT FORM

Kuwait arrive at Canberra on the back of moderate recent results, but with a solid defensive record the Socceroos may find difficult to breach. A 3-2 loss to Syria has proven the only defensive blip – Kuwait have only conceded three goals in their other seven matches in 2009.

Although losing to Oman last month in their opening qualifier may have dented their confidence, the Kuwaitis have already played numerous hard-fought international matches this year and are generally a well-organised and cohesive team.

THE KUWAITIS HAVE ALREADY PLAYED NUMEROUS HARD-FOUGHT INTERNATIONAL MATCHES THIS YEAR AND ARE GENERALLY A WELL-ORGANISED AND COHESIVE TEAM.

The year began with the Gulf Cup where Kuwait saw off Bahrain, host-nation Oman and current Asian champions Iraq in the group stage of the eight-nation regional showpiece. The results guaranteed a semi-final berth where they suffered a narrow 1-0 loss against traditional heavyweights Saudi Arabia.

Results have been mixed since the Gulf Cup with Kuwait recording a win, loss and draw in three friendly internationals.

They suffered the disappointment of not qualifying for Asian Cup 2007 despite knocking over Australia in an impressive showing at Kuwait City in late 2006, up to seven players from that squad are set to feature at Canberra.

Kuwait were eliminated from FIFA World Cup qualifying last year, finishing behind Iran and the United Arab Emirates in stage three.

The Kuwaitis clearly stated their intentions for this match with a nine-day camp in New Zealand that included two low-scoring wins over top local sides Auckland City and Waitakere United. Despite being without star striker Al-Azemi, who remained with his Saudi club side Al-Shabab, the camp would have proved invaluable for new coach Tufegdzic.

ABOUT KUWAIT

Despite a current world ranking of 125, Kuwait still hold sway over the Socceroos recording four wins to three in eight meetings since the first meeting between the two nations during the FIFA World Cup qualifiers in 1977.

Like many Persian Gulf nations, Kuwait have long been high-achievers on the international football stage. With a population of just 2.5 million, Kuwait are one of the smallest nations to ever reach the FIFA World Cup finals, which they did in 1982, recording an impressive draw against Czechoslowakia and only losing narrowly to England.

The nation is rich in football pedigree having won a remarkable nine Gulf Cups, far more than other side including regional giants Saudi Arabia. Two years prior to their FIFA World Cup appearance Kuwait were crowned Asian Cup champions, in what was a golden era for the national team.

Kuwait were the first side Australia met after Germany 2006, with a domestic-based Socceroos side triumphing 2-0 at home. However the return leg a month later in the heat and unfamiliar environment in Kuwait City saw the Socceroos submit by the same scoreline.

With so many of Pim Verbeek's squad coming from the two teams in the Hyundai A-League grand final, we caught up with players from Melbourne Victory and Adelaide United after last weekend's decider, for their thoughts on the chance to play in the green and gold

AFTER THE WHISTLE

ARCHIE THOMPSON
Melbourne Victory

With the adulation of a second grand final win very fresh in the memory, Melbourne Victory striker Archie Thompson is already eyeing his next challenge: reproducing his electric domestic club form for the Socceroos, starting with the Kuwait match this week.

Speaking after securing the 1-0 win over Adelaide at the weekend, Thompson had already started shifting his focus to tonight's Socceroos match and comments made by Verbeek the previous week. Labelled "absolutely hopeless" – along with Danny Allsopp – Thompson remains confident, but is motivated to heed the words of his national coach.

"I'm going to enjoy the moment, but it's back to business," Thompson said. "I have to bring my confidence with me (to the Socceroos camp) and I have to bring my A-game."

Thompson, who has scored 21 times in 31 games for his country, fired back at Verbeek in the days leading up to the grand final, saying the coach's defensive tactics left himself and Allsopp isolated without sufficient support. But this week is another game and, hopefully, another opportunity to prove his worth in the Socceroos side.

"I'm just going to enjoy my football," Thompson said. "I've put too much pressure on myself before to persuade people that have opinions of me, but obviously I'm just going to work hard and play with a smile."

Thompson said he and Pim would discuss the striker's game in the lead up to the Kuwait game. "I've spoken with Pim and we're going to sit down and talk about what

FABIAN BARBIERO
Adelaide United

Fabian Barbiero never expected to receive it, but his call-up to the Qantas Socceroos squad to face Kuwait has topped off a superb season for the Adelaide midfielder: contesting the premiership and grand final at home, and performing admirably in the Asian Champions League and FIFA Club World Cup. The 24 year-old looks to have come of age.

"I can't quite believe [my season]," he said. "Grand final in the Champions League, A-League Grand Final and now a Socceroos call-up – it's been a lot for me but I'm taking it all one step at a time."

Barbiero spent much of his early career working through Adelaide's local competitions, but is now being rewarded for his impressive season under coach Aurelio Vidmar.

"Coming from the local leagues, I haven't had much coaching through the AIS and all that kind

staff (at Adelaide) who've given me the opportunity and developed me as a player. It's been massive this season but a good experience. I thought I was too old – but football's a funny thing and anything's possible."

Now all he has to face is a top-level training session under Pim Verbeek – but Barbiero is determined not to be overawed.

"I had a chat about it with Robbie Cornthwaite just so I know what to expect. They said it's like a normal training session – just a lot more intense. But it's an even playing field, so I'll get out there to train and perform to take it what it is."

RODRIGO VARGAS
Melbourne Victory

After finally making his debut in the green and gold in the qualifier against Indonesia, Rodd Vargas now has a fair idea of what it takes to stake a claim in the Socceroos starting XI – but if anyone deserves it, it's the hard-working Melbourne defender.

"I never think that far

I'll be there with the rest of the boys and if I get the chance to play again I'll be ready."

Vargas has been a central figure in Melbourne's push for A-League glory this season, and although he remains modest about his personal form, he's eager to make the most of another chance with the national team.

"It's easy once you've won the premiership for people to talk you up but the [Melbourne] team's been fantastic all year. It's a great honour to play for your country – not just for myself but for my family and friends who put a lot of time in me. Whether I play or not, just to be in the camp is fantastic."

EUGENE GALEKOVIC
Adelaide United

There is a reason why, in this season's A-League Team of the Year, Eugene Galekovic was voted goalkeeper of the season by his peers. The Adelaide stopper produced stunning saves time and again as the Reds pushed Melbourne all the way for the title.

Now Galekovic has his chance to assert his own dominance over Melbourne, by claiming the Socceroos' No.1 jersey against Kuwait ahead of Michael Theoklitos, who he was unable to displace during his time with Victory.

"At [grand final] stage two years ago, I was at Melbourne on the bench, so I'm very happy where I've come (this season) and it's been terrific to play in a lot of competitions – the Asian Champions League, World Club Cup and the grand final – it's been sensational."

Despite his excellent season, Galekovic remains conservative in his dreams for the national team, and his chances of replacing current No.1 Mark Schwarzer.

"Definitely not," he said. "He's playing in a good competition, and considering the number of A-League players playing in the main Socceroos team, I don't think it's on. The boys in Europe are playing 40 to 50 games a year and until I, or any of the others boys, get to Europe I think we'll always struggle."

MICHAEL THEOKLITOS
Melbourne Victory

Eight clean sheets, a domestic clean sweep and now a call-up to the Socceroos squad: it's fair to say it's been a successful season for Michael Theoklitos.

It remains to be seen whether Pim Verbeek will look to trial the Melbourne 'keeper for the first time ahead of Galekovic, but Theoklitos is just enjoying his opportunity and the experience.

"I'm hoping to be part of the team," he said. "It's up to Pim, obviously, but I'm looking forward to getting into camp; I'll just do my best and hopefully get a call-up. Just keep working hard and see what happens."

After taking part in the qualifier against Indonesia, Theoklitos had a brief taste of what the international game means and what the national coach expects. "Pim's been very good. We only had a short time together in Indonesia but he seems very good; he demands a bit, he knows what he wants and tells you and you've got to follow the game-plan."

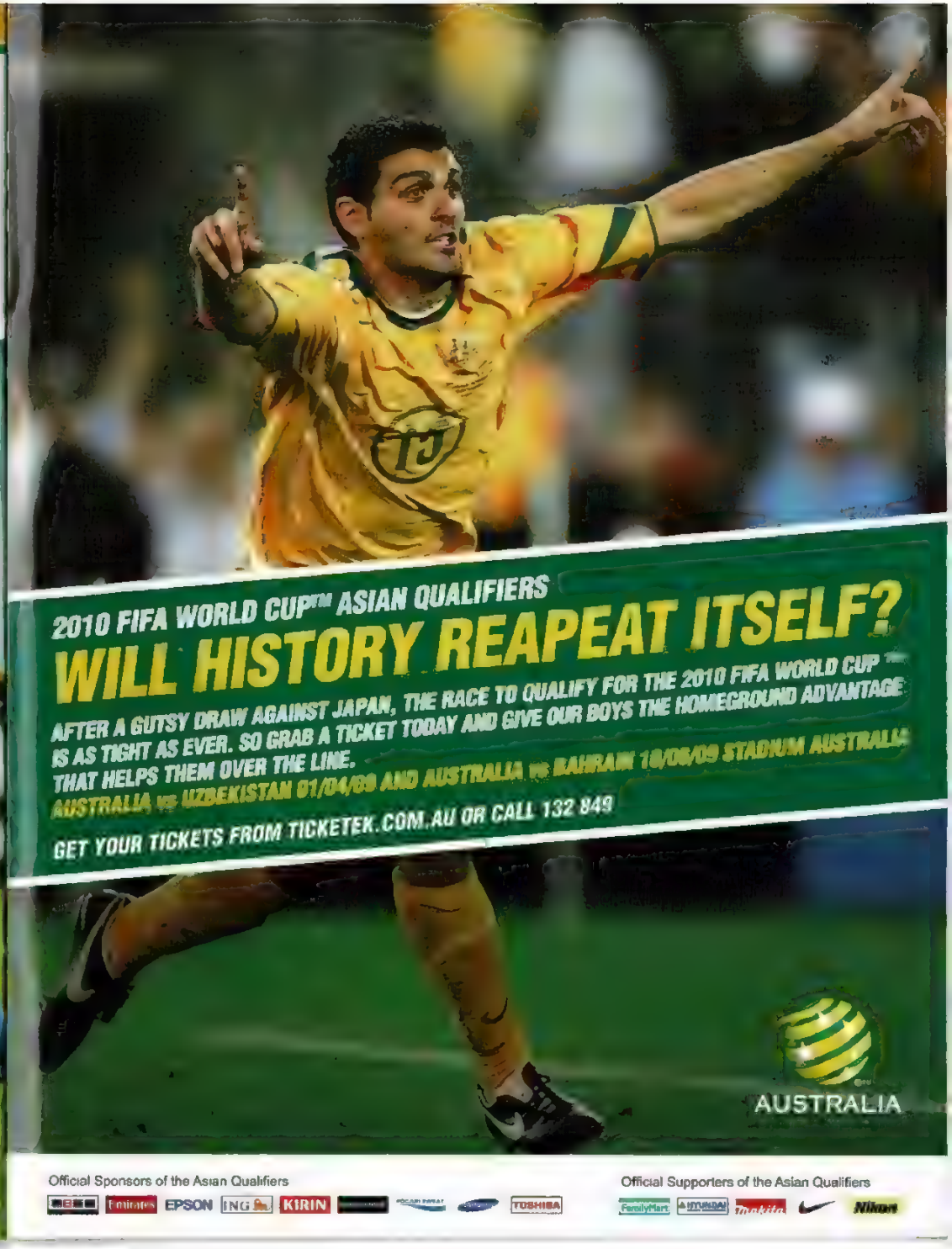
And when he gets into camp, will the Victory players say anything about the grand final to their Adelaide rivals?

"Ah, we'll mention it," he said. Maybe just once or twice.

GETTING TO KNOW...

TAREK ELRICH

What you been up to during your off season?
Been preparing for the Asian Champions League. We had five days off after coming back from Indonesia, and then we've been flat-out training.
Looking forward to going to the ACL?
It'll be good; something different – I've played under 23 against teams from Asia, but it's going to be different at club level. I'm looking forward to it.
What's your favourite holiday destination?
Lebanon, most of my family is back there and we've got a house there.
If you could be the lead singer of a band, which one would it be and why?
Which one got all the chicks? Guns N' Roses?
Yeah they got their fair share...
I'll go Guns N' Roses then.
Which three people – dead or alive – would you invite to a dinner party?
Tough one... Megan Gale, Eric Cantona and *[long pause...]* I would say Cristiano Ronaldo, but that's too many football players, so we'll put Muhammad Ali in there.
What's your favourite TV show?
What's the briefcase game?
Deal Or No Deal?
Yeah, *Deal Or No Deal.*
That's a shocker...
Put *Friends* in there; I've been watching that a bit. It's Matt Thompson's fault; he got the series and we've been watching it.
Who in world football would you most like to come up against?
Cristiano Ronaldo – I'd like to see just how quick he really is in real life; being a defender I love kicking the fancy people.
What would you do if you won the lotto?
I'd give a lot to charity, like the children's hospital, and I'd buy myself some fancy cars and jewellery. And a nice beach house in Newcastle.
Finish these sentences...
If I was to buy Pim Verbeek a present I would buy him...
[Laughs.] Can I get help with this one?
Yeah, go for it.
[Asks Ben Kantarovski for advice...] I don't know him that well... A surfboard, some thongs, white singlet and those blue workie shorts from Lowes.
This time next year I will...
Be celebrating the A-League grand final.



FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

Pim Verbeek's all-A-League Socceroos squads give an opportunity for the young, up-coming stars of Australian football to gain experience

NOT ONLY HAVE we seen a number of young players debut throughout the Hyundai A-League season 2008/09, showing promise for the competition in years to come, but with Qantas Socceroos coach Pim Verbeek's decision to select only A-League players for Asian Cup qualifiers, we are now seeing more youth players appearing in the green and gold, and gaining valuable experience in the development of their football careers.

With the announcement of the squad to play against Kuwait in Australia's second qualifier, a few more young names graced the list. All have been stand-outs for their club this season and now have had the opportunity to go into camp alongside names such as Craig Moore and Archie Thompson, and train under one of the best national coaches the Socceroos have had

BEN KANTAROVSKI

The Newcastle Jets midfielder holds many records for his age. Literally.

He became the youngest player signed to an A-League contract when he signed with Jets on a four-year deal at the start of 2008. He then went on to become the youngest player to debut in the A-League when he played against Central Coast Mariners in round one of the 2008/09 season. Since then, the 17-year-old has impressed not only fans at club level, but also the national coach, earning his call-up to this Socceroos squad and also taking the record of being the youngest Socceroo squad member ever.

In his rookie season he took home both the Newcastle Jets' Rising Star award and Player of the Year and coach Gary van Egmond has said his style of play already resembles that of some of the great footballers Australia has produced, players such as Ned Zelic and Paul Okon.

Kantarovski's selection in the squad as a development player shows how highly his potential is regarded with Verbeek believing the chance to train with some of the A-League's best will be beneficial for the youngster. "We think it's good for him, his club and Australian football to let him train with the best players in the league for a few days," Verbeek said.

He has played in 13 matches for Jets this season and started in each one of them

DANIEL MULLEN

Daniel Mullen has experienced a meteoric rise this season that began with his 90th minute A-League debut for Adelaide United in round four, followed by a starting position a week later against Sydney FC.

Just three weeks later, United coach Aurelio Vidmar started Mullen in the Asian Champions League semi-final against FC Bunyodkor where he showed self-belief beyond his years, holding his own against international stars like Brazilian superstar Rivaldo.

From there, he became a regular feature in the Reds' line-up, starting 10 games in total throughout the season and playing in 12. He played with the Young Socceroos during their qualification matches for the FIFA Youth World Championship, but possibly his biggest moment came when he scored from a header during the Club World Cup in December that put Adelaide back in touch with Waitakere in the opening match. The goal was nominated by FIFA as one of the top 10 of the tournament.

Mullen's performances throughout the season put him squarely on Verbeek's radar, with the coach revealing they had been looking at the 19-year-old before his selection for this squad "Mullen we were thinking about before we played Indonesia (in January). But he got injured," Verbeek said.

> "MITCH SHOULD BE COOLER IN FRONT OF GOAL TO SCORE MORE GOALS, BUT HE'S AN INTERESTING PLAYER FOR THE FUTURE."

With Mullen showing great potential, this Socceroos selection is sure to not be his last

MITCH NICHOLS

While not a new face in the Hyundai A-League this season, Mitch Nichols has really made his mark in 2008/09, starting in nine matches and featuring in 13 overall. By the end of the season, and with Queensland Roar pushing for the finals, Nichols was a critical part of the Roar machine

He scored five goals for Queensland, including one in each of the minor semi-finals against Central Coast Mariners, and in the preliminary final against Adelaide he was the player with the most chances, demonstrating his ability to get himself into position in front of goal

His selection in the Socceroos squad at 19 years old surprised few, but Verbeek's praise after announcing his selections had many thinking Nichols could be heading for his first cap as well.

"Mitch is doing very well," Verbeek said. "I've seen all the Roar games in the last month and he keeps on going and he's always there in the penalty box.

"He should be cooler in front of goal to score some more goals, but he's a good guy – he's an interesting player for the future."

MICHAEL ZULLO

Queensland Roar left winger Michael Zullo is an example of what experience can do for a player.

While still only 20 years old, he had an outstanding season in 2008/09 and became a crucial part of Roar's attacking force down the left side. Having earned a call-up for the under-23 Australian team during their qualifying for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, in January this year he made his full international debut with the Socceroos when he came off the bench against Indonesia in their Asian Cup qualifier. While he only has one cap to his name, Zullo has become a recognised name in Australian football.

It hasn't been a smooth ascension to this level and it took hard work for Zullo to get to where he is. Roar coach Frank Farina said he's being duly rewarded. "He worked extremely hard for having not been in the first team and now he's in the first 11 and he's called up to the national squad and he's understanding exactly what it takes to be a top professional player."

GETTING TO KNOW...

MATT SIMON

IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES

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Are you enjoying being part of the Socceroos squad?
Yeah, everything's out of the way for the A-League season so it's good to be involved.
What's your favourite holiday destination?
That would probably be Paris. My missus's family are from down near Lyon. Always good to know a local, especially when it's free.
If you could be the lead singer of a band which one would it be?
Foo Fighters. I don't mind a bit of Dave Grohl.
Which three people – dead or alive – would you invite to a dinner party?
Roger Federer, Tiger Woods and Jenifer Aniston.
What's your favourite TV show?
Prison Break.
Even when he broke out of prison?
Yeah, I still rate it.
If you were going to cook dinner for the missus what would you do, what's your speciality?
Far out... Probably burritos.
Who in world football would you most like to come up against?
Paolo Maldini.
What actor would you want to play you in a movie of your life?
Who's that guy out of *Shooter*?
Mark Wahlberg.
What's the first thing you'd do if you won the lotto?
I'd buy a massive boat. A cruiser.
I'd hire someone to drive it for me.
Finish these sentences...
If I was to buy Pim a birthday present I would get him...
A goal for the national team.
This time next year I will...
Hopefully still be scoring goals.
My Socceroos teammates would say I am...
Very white.

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ROAD TO QATAR

Australia's game against Kuwait is the last Asian Cup action until later this year – but how are their international rivals faring in the qualification campaign for the 2011 tournament?

AFTER Australia's last outing in the Asian Cup, the Qantas Socceroos are certainly more aware of just how dangerous the other nations in the tournament can be, particularly when playing in a different and difficult climate.

With that experience now behind them, the Socceroos can be optimistic of progressing to the finals in 2011, but there are still plenty of games to be played before then between the 19 nations competing for qualification. This is how the opposition is shaping up across Asia...

GROUP A

Australia's rivals in the hunt for qualification for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, Bahrain and Japan, currently sit top of the table in Group A. With two games played, Bahrain have a perfect record of two wins, four goals and only one conceded.

Under experienced Czech tactician Milan Máčala, Bahrain have got their campaign off to a fantastic start with a 3-0 away win over Hong Kong, and a shock 1-0 victory against heavyweights Japan.

That result heaped more pressure on Japan coach Takeshi Okada, who has come under increasing pressure from Blue Samurai supporters. Japan's only points came from a 2-1 win over Yemen in January, but the Bahrain result certainly gives the Yemenis hope, placing the two teams on equal points.

Group A do not play again until November, however, by which time Japan could have secured passage to the World Cup and will be able to focus on their supposed weaker rivals.

Group A

Team	GP	W	D	L	GF	GA	+/-	Pts
BAHRAIN	2	2	0	0	4	1	3	6
JAPAN	2	1	0	1	2	2	0	3
YEMEN	2	1	0	1	2	2	0	3
HONG KONG	2	0	0	2	1	4	-3	0

THE SOCCEROOS ARE CERTAINLY MORE AWARE OF JUST HOW DANGEROUS OTHER NATIONS IN THE ASIAN CUP CAN BE, PARTICULARLY IN A DIFFERENT AND DIFFICULT CLIMATE.

GROUP B

After their difficult game against Indonesia, the Socceroos must look to get all three points at home to Kuwait. Group B hasn't exactly been full of fireworks, with just one goal scored in the opening three fixtures – but that 1-0 away result at the end of January was enough to put Oman on top and Kuwait at the bottom. It was also enough to put their coach Mohammed Ibrahim out of a job, to be replaced by his assistant, Serbian Goran Tufegdzic.

With Kuwait also carrying their World Cup qualifying group, this is a good opportunity for Australia to take top spot on goal difference. The next round is in November, with the Socceroos facing Oman over two fixtures in quick succession – the winner of those could give themselves a buffer at the top of the group.

Group B

Team	GP	W	D	L	GF	GA	+/-	Pts
OMAN	2	1	1	0	1	0	1	4
INDONESIA	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
AUSTRALIA	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
KUWAIT	1	0	0	1	0	1	-1	0

GROUP C

With just three teams making up this group, United Arab Emirates looked to take a big step to qualification with their 5-0 thrashing of Malaysia at KLFA Stadium in January. But that good result was turned over a week later, when UAE suffered a 1-0 home defeat at the hands of Uzbekistan.

Australia are already aware of how tough the Uzbeks are, only just coming away with a 1-0 win in the World Cup qualifier at Tashkent in September last year, and Rauf Ilileyev's fancied side are favourites to be at the top of this smaller group at the end.

After their demoralising defeat, Malaysia face two games against the Uzbeks in November and must hope to get some kind of result – but it doesn't look good.

Group C

Team	GP	W	D	L	GF	GA	+/-	Pts
UTD ARAB EMIRATES	2	1	0	1	5	1	4	3
UZBEKISTAN	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	3
MALAYSIA	1	0	0	1	0	5	-5	0

GROUP D

Syria currently sit atop Group D, with maximum points from their opening two fixtures. Most pleasing was a hard-fought 3-2 win over China, where coach Fajr Ibrahim's side went 3-0 up before half-time, and held up against constant Chinese pressure in the second half to hold on for the win.

But the under-fire Chinese players showed what they are capable of with a 6-1 thumping of Vietnam in the following game.

With the top two set to face the bottom two in November, and given the form of both Vietnam and Lebanon, Group D is unlikely to provide too many surprises over the remaining qualifying stages.

Group D

Team	GP	W	D	L	GF	GA	+/-	Pts
SYRIA	2	2	0	0	5	2	3	6
CHINA P.R.	2	1	0	1	8	4	4	3
VIETNAM	2	1	0	1	4	7	-3	3
LEBANON	2	0	0	2	1	5	-4	0

GROUP E

Iran started their campaign in style with a 6-0 rout of Singapore that left coach Ali Daei grinning from ear to ear. The going was harder, though, when they travelled to Thailand two weeks later, with the game finishing 0-0.

Former Manchester City manager Peter Reid, now in charge of the Thai team, was happy to get another point, after his side also held Jordan to a goalless draw.

But the Thais will certainly have to do more in front of goal when they travel to Singapore in November – it's going to be no easy task. The Lions have been making steady progress under coach Radojko Avramovic and were able to bounce back from the heavy loss to Iran successfully, with a 2-1 win over Jordan.

Group E certainly looks like one of the more open groups (with just one point separating each of the teams on current standings), and the next round, to be played in November this year, should offer more clues as to how the current squads match up.

Group E

Team	GP	W	D	L	GF	GA	+/-	Pts
IR IRAN	2	1	1	0	6	0	6	4
SINGAPORE	2	1	0	1	2	7	-5	3
THAILAND	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
JORDAN	2	0	1	1	1	2	-1	1

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EYES ON THE PRIZE

Next month, the Qantas Socceroos face a crucial game against Uzbekistan in Sydney; at stake, a possible spot in the 2010 World Cup finals

THE race for the World Cup – pain, heartbreaking last-gasp goals, stress – it's all in sight. With the qualifiers for the 2011 Asian Cup out of the way for a few months after this Kuwait game, Qantas Socceroos boss Pim Verbeek will once again be looking to South Africa.

Australia's road to the 2010 World Cup looks clear – but a number of obstacles remain. Next up is a crucial qualifier against Uzbekistan at Sydney on April 1.

At first glance, this would seem an easy fixture. Verbeek has guided the team to the top of Group 1, without losing a game or conceding a goal. Uzbekistan, on the other hand, are stuck at the bottom, with three losses, one draw, and just one goal.

How can Rauf Ilileyev's side present the Socceroos with any difficulties? As always, playing against a team that has just one thing on their mind – not losing – can mean a hard time for the home side.

The last time the two met in September, Australia found how troublesome such tactics can be. At home, Uzbekistan were able to attack and put the Socceroos under plenty of pressure throughout the game. It was a good test of Verbeek's credentials, one he passed with the only possible criteria: a win. Scott Chipperfield's single goal was enough for Australia to come away with a deserved three points.

Locations such as Tashkent can all too often provide the proverbial banana skin, and it was a committed, organised and structured performance from the green and gold – just as we've come to expect from Verbeek's teams.

When Uzbekistan travel to ANZ Stadium in April their game plan will almost certainly be to sit back and defend, hoping to nick a goal on the counter-attack. But this doesn't necessarily mean fans are in for a stale encounter. You can be sure the Uzbeks won't travel all this way to lose.

The Socceroos will have to be at their best to break down a stubborn, defensively structured outfit that will, from the outset, aim to stifle and break down attacks. And one would imagine that more senior players are likely to return for the fixture with the chance to effectively seal qualification to the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

With the top two going through automatically to the World Cup finals, the round of games on March 27 – when Australia has the bye – will tell Pim Verbeek's men whether a win five days later will seal qualification. This should be more than enough motivation for the Socceroos to go for the win. Expect a professional, yet attacking, display.

With the World Cup in sight, this is the perfect opportunity for the normally conservative coach to cut loose a little and show what his side can do when they have attack in mind.

2010 WORLD CUP - GROUP 1 STANDINGS

TEAM	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	PTS
AUSTRALIA	4	3	1	0	6	0	10
JAPAN	4	2	2	0	7	3	8
BAHRAIN	4	1	1	2	4	5	4
QATAR	4	1	1	2	4	8	4
UZBEKISTAN	4	0	1	3	1	6	1

DON'T MISS OUT!

The Qantas Socceroos take on Uzbekistan at ANZ Stadium at Sydney on April 1. This could be your chance to cheer on the boys in green and gold as they book their spot in South Africa. Be there to experience history. **Tickets are available from Ticketek; online at www.ticketek.com.au or call 132 849.**

IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES

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THE QUIZ

How well do you know your Qantas Socceroos?

01 How many players from the Hyundai A-League Grand Final were named in the Socceroos squad to play Kuwait?

02 What was the score in Australia's Asian Cup qualifier against Indonesia?

03 What is Australia's current FIFA world ranking?

04 In what year was the first Australia football team constituted?

05 Who was their first opponent?

06 Who is the youngest player to be named in a Socceroos squad?

07 In which World Cup finals tournament did Australia make their first appearance?

08 Of which football confederation was Australia a member before being accepted into Asia?

09 How many times did Australia win the Oceania Nations Cup?

10 Which player has the most caps for Australia?

11 How many goals has Archie Thompson scored for Australia?

12 How many goals did Archie Thompson score in Australia's 31-0 win over American Samoa in 2001?

13 Who has scored the most goals for Australia?

14 At which World Cup finals tournament did Australia make their second appearance?

15 In which round did Australia exit the 2006 World Cup finals?

16 Who did they lose to and what was the score?

17 Which team did Australia lose to in the quarter-finals of their first Asian Cup finals campaign in 2007?

18 Australia has had four Australian-born coaches in either a head coach or caretaker role – who are they?

19 Australia has played Kuwait eight times since 1977 – how many times have they won?

20 Which two teams defeated Australia to gain qualification for the France 1998 and Korea/Japan 2002 World Cups respectively?

21 Where are Australia currently positioned in their World Cup 2010 qualifying group?

22 How many goals did Australia score at the World Cup in Germany in 2006?

23 Which Australian coach has the best win record to date?

24 Which current Socceroos squad member (selected in the past 12 months) has the most caps?

25 What is Pim Verbeek's full name?

26 Pim Verbeek was assistant coach at World Cup finals in 2002 and 2006 under which two Dutch-born coaches?

27 Who was Australia's captain during the 2006 World Cup finals?

28 How many goals did Tim Cahill score for Australia in the 2006 World Cup finals?

29 In what year did Australia gain acceptance to the Asian Football Confederation?

30 Which Australia-born player was shown three yellow cards in one match against Australia in World Cup 2006?

IMAGES GETTY IMAGES

ANSWERS: 1. 12. 2. 0-0. 3. 27. 4. 1922. 5. New Zealand. 6. Ben Kantarovski (17 years 35 days). 7. Was Guernsey 1974. 8. Oceania Football Confederation. 9. Four (1980, 1996, 2000, 2004). 10. Alex Tobin (1988-98, 87 caps). 11. 21 (32 appearances). 12. 13 (it was a world record). 13. Damian Mori (1992-02, 29 goals). 14. Cameroon 2000. 15. Round two. 16. Italy. 1-0. 17. Japan on penalties (1-1 (4-5)). 18. Les Scheinflug (1981-83, 83 CT). 90 (CTs. 91 (CTs. Ve Kemudge 92 (CTs. Frank Farina 99-05; Graham Arnold 06-07 (CTs. 19. 3. 20. Iran and Uruguay. 21. 1 (top of group). 22. 31. 23. Les Scheinflug (1981-94 @ 83 CTs. 15 wins, 4 draws, 3 loss. 24. Brett Emerton (86). 25. Ryan Tim Verbeek. 26. Guus Hiddink and Dick Advocaat (Guus Koreas). 27. Mark Viduka. 28. 2. 29. Japan. 30. 2005. Mehmet Aurel (Canada).

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